

# Setting Them Free: Students as Co-Producers of Honors Education

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the factors that differentiate honors from regular teaching at the Faculty of Geosciences at Utrecht University, the Netherlands, is the freedom that honors students enjoy, a freedom that evokes excellence because it is focused and targeted. This targeted freedom takes three different shapes in our honors program and comes with specific challenges for both students and teachers. While the attractions and advantages of such freedom are both theoretically and practically significant, our experience has also demonstrated drawbacks that need to be addressed and resolved in creating effective honors education.

Frank Aydelotte, one of the founders of honors education (Swarthmore College Faculty; Pennock; Guzy; Rinn) endorsed the importance of freedom and autonomy in the earliest beginnings of honors programs in the United States, and freedom has remained an important focus in the honors literature ever since. Freedom fosters scholarship in the student's field of interest (Robinson; Vallerand et al.); it supports intrinsic motivation and fosters scholastic excellence (Ryan & Deci; Niemiec & Ryan; Simmons & Page); and it challenges students to develop an open mindset and step "out of the box" in order to make great achievements (Dweck). However, freedom also poses certain challenges to students, teachers, and the faculty in general; these challenges include guarding a program's coherence and quality, marketing the freedom in a clear and effective way, and ensuring that students challenge themselves.

Course evaluations of the honors program of the Faculty of Geosciences at Utrecht University have demonstrated that students value freedom; they believe that it enhances their learning and stimulates creativity. They appreciate the opportunities to discover and follow their own fields of interest as well as to take initiative and responsibility (Wolfensberger, 2008). At the

same time, this freedom comes with a challenge: freedom is not, in fact, free, nor is it easy or optional.

The challenges and struggles as well as the rewards that we have experienced might be familiar to honors educators around the world, but they are also shaped by the particular contexts of our program within the Faculty of Geosciences, within Utrecht University, and within the Netherlands, contexts that we will now introduce.

## **HONORS COLLEGE GEOSCIENCES AT UTRECHT UNIVERSITY**

The Honors College Geosciences accommodates undergraduate students enrolled in undergraduate programs of earth sciences, physical and human geography, planning, environmental sciences, and innovation management within the Faculty of Geoscience. (See Appendix A for a contextual history of the college.) The aim of the honors college is to contribute to four realms of a gifted student's development: a) academic skills, b) geosciences content (both in-depth and across the disciplines), c) the position of students in society, and d) personal growth and leadership (Honours College Geowetenschappen). Students are thus offered opportunities to practice research skills, become involved in the academic community of the faculty, do projects that make a societal contribution, and reflect on their positions as geoscientists in society. Undergraduate research projects and the honors theses offer ample opportunities to gain in-depth knowledge. Other multidisciplinary courses as well as extracurricular offerings like the *geo home* debate evenings offer "broader geo-content." Finally, students learn reflective skills to think about who they are, who they want to be, and how they can use the honors program to reach their aims.

Students enter the honors college either halfway their freshman year or at the start of their second year as undergraduates. Both grades and motivation are important in the selection and admission procedure. After a student with above average grades applies for the program, an intake meeting takes place during which both the honors coordinator and the candidate can assess if the candidate's motivations and ambitions are in line with program; candidates should be open, for instance, to crossing the borders of their geo-discipline. Not all gifted students find their ambitions matched to those of the program. Although students are admitted to the program with the expectation that they will finish it, they have to apply again each year (Honours College Geowetenschappen).

The Honors College Geosciences is a college but does not have its own building or dean. Students follow the majority of their courses in one of the bachelor's degree programmes mentioned above. An honors degree consists

of 210 credits instead of the 180 credits for a regular degree (60 ects is the equivalent of one year in the European credit transfer system), and honors students are expected to finish their undergraduate program in three years, just like regular students. Honors students take 30 credits of honours courses that substitute for regular courses in the different undergraduate programs; they write an honors thesis instead of a regular bachelor's thesis; and they take 30 credits in additional courses such as honors seminars.

The students within the honors college are treated as one community even though they are enrolled in different undergraduate programs. Slightly over a third of the honors credits are spent on courses in which the whole group participates: the weekly honors seminars, the bimonthly "Geohuis" (Geo home) debates, and a multidisciplinary project. The remaining credits are invested in courses that have a disciplinary focus. All honors students write an honors thesis for 15 credits, with requirements determined within their discipline. Honors students see each other regularly, do projects together, and end each academic year with an honors conference where they present the outcomes of their (research) projects. Honors students are thus part of an honors community, and freedom is an integral value within this community.

## **TARGETED FREEDOM**

The honors program of the Faculty of Geosciences at Utrecht University offers its students "targeted freedom" aimed at academic and personal development. This freedom comes in three guises: (1) freedom for students to discover their own field(s) of interest and to follow their passion; (2) freedom to develop their own learning strategies; and (3) freedom to be involved in and responsible for their own education. These three kinds of freedom, each described in detail below, are interrelated and are integral to the honors program but at the same time can deter or undermine the value of the honors experience for both teachers and students and so must be balanced by structured requirements and collaboration between students and faculty.

## **PASSION**

Honors students are invited to explore their fields of interest both inside and outside the geo-sciences and to discover how to combine these interests in their education. Pursuing their passion should evoke excellence because it motivates students to persist in deliberate practice (Ericsson; Vallerand, Blanchard, et al.; Fredericks et al.; Bonneville-Roussy et al.).

The exploration of passions within our honors college is future-oriented, focusing on students' ambitions for their future lives as members of society, researchers, policy makers, consultants, entrepreneurs, or teachers. To learn how to handle this freedom, students learn to reflect on their personal

development. Freedom to follow your passion implies that you know how to choose between many alternatives, and over the years we have noted that choosing does not always come naturally to gifted students. Honors students often find it difficult to focus on one ambition or to set priorities because during their educational careers they have combined many tasks and performed all of them well. Other honors students might not yet have discovered their passions and ambitions or do not connect those to their education. When students are not clear what their fields of interests are or when they still want to pursue the whole field of physical geography or environmental science, they might get into trouble when they have to choose a topic for a research project. They might vacillate between many alternatives or just not find a topic that really excites them. To help students deal with this freedom and discover their passions, ambitions, and strengths, we ask them to write a mission statement.

According to yearly evaluations from 1998 onwards, students especially value this first kind of freedom. In a 2008 survey, alumni explicitly mention this freedom within an existing overall structure as a strength the program should maintain (Sweijen & Wolfensberger). The 2011–2012 evaluation again confirms how important students find this freedom (see Appendix B). The autonomy that the honors program offers students has helped them discover and follow their ambitions. As one example among many, a student used the undergraduate honors program to combine his interest in art with geography, eventually leading to a PhD thesis that he defended in March 2012 (Zebracki). But there are many more stories of students who discovered their drive or their passion within the honors program. A detailed case study and numerous quotations from students and alumni are available in Wolfensberger (2008) as well as Sweijen & Wolfensberger.

In practice, this freedom means that students can choose the topic not just for their honors theses but for some of their courses such as the Creative Challenge Project, an open-ended course where students not only choose the topic of their individual projects but also set the goals, decide on the output, and set their own deadlines. The aim of the course is to stimulate students to step “outside the box” and do projects that do not offer the comfort of regular course work. Finishing a research project for an honors thesis requires an even more substantial amount of time and effort from the students. A well-chosen topic that matches students’ fields of interests or ambitions is an important motivator during the process. At the same time, requirements for the thesis place limits on students’ freedom that include the rigors of original research and strict deadlines. These rules apply equally to all students writing a thesis and place limitations on their free time as well as free choice. Nevertheless, some honors students are able to do research abroad or in an internship.

Although all honors students support the notion that a well-chosen topic keeps them motivated, they do not all have an easy time coming up with a researchable topic even though they have practice at proposing their own topics in other honors courses. Therefore, we ask them to start their search for a suitable topic early on and brainstorm with teachers about their ideas. Students have also organized peer feedback with each other.

## **LEARNING STRATEGIES AND BEHAVIOURS**

Autonomy in learning strategies and behaviours is important in fostering motivation (Niemiec & Ryan). Honors students are invited to explore which learning strategy suits them best. Although the regular undergraduate program does not prescribe how students must learn, lectures, coursework, and exams do set a framework. We think it is important for honors students not just to be aware of learning strategies and behaviours but also to combine different strategies and behaviours (Hayes).

Honors students are selected based on their motivations and grades. Good grades mean that the students have mastered the way exams and assignments are organized, but these are not necessarily the ways students learn the best or most. Some students might not be aware of their optimal learning strategy as they are not really challenged to learn new things. Students in the honors program, though, are granted the freedom to find out how they learn best both as individuals and within a group. Being able to work with other motivated and gifted students is an opportunity that honors students highly value in the program (Schipper). Unlike group work in regular courses, honors students do not have to drag along unmotivated group members or compensate for work from students who are too easily satisfied. Working with other talented and motivated students on a research project challenges them to figure out how to achieve outstanding outcomes. Collaboration also confronts them with qualities of their own work that they might have taken for granted, for example how they tackle problems or plan projects. They might thus discover their strengths and preferences but also learn to value the input and strategies of their fellow students.

Freedom related to learning strategies and behaviors is visible in the student-led classes where students organize the course and choose what classroom activities match their preferences for learning. Such freedom is built in many other projects within the honors program, and in many courses—such as the multidisciplinary project, learning research, and creative challenge projects—students cooperate in small groups of two to four members.

## INVOLVEMENT

Honors students are asked to be involved in their education and in the honors program. This involvement requires leadership: taking responsibility and making deliberate choices. This third freedom is thus strongly related to the other two kinds of freedom because it means that students are trusted to make their own plans and, at least partly, to set their own learning aims. In some courses, such as Creative Challenge Project and Honours Learning Research: Human Geography and Planning, students are free to plan their own schedule and activities with no official start-time or deadline. Students recognize and value this freedom (see Appendix B).

Involvement and responsibility mean more than taking charge of your own learning aims or planning. Typically honors students should be challenged to become more than just (critical) consumers of education. We invite students to become co-producers and co-owners of the honors college. Some honors students thus organize the yearly honors conference; others publish the yearly honors booklet; again others prepare student-led classes or make a presentation at a *Geo home* meeting. Honors students also participate in information meetings of the honors college, and some do research projects on honors education. Students find this involvement an important part of their education. In the 2008–2009 yearly evaluation of the honors program, students stressed that they wanted to have a formal say in the honors college. As a result, the honors educational committee was founded by the students as an advisory board. Besides advising the program leaders, this board organizes mentors for newly arrived honors students and takes the lead in the yearly evaluations.

## TARGETED FREEDOM IN PRACTICE

The freedoms we have implemented within the Geosciences Honors College are advantageous to students but often pose challenges for teachers, for instance in the student-led honors classess. These classes take place within the curriculum of honors seminars, which are organized weekly for all undergraduate honors students in the Faculty of Geosciences. The aim of the honors seminars is to make connections between academic skills, “geo-content,” the student’s position in society, and the student’s personal development. These seminars have been part of the honors program from the early beginnings in the late 1990s. Since the fall of 2011, the seminars have been grouped in five subsequent themes: leadership, differences in academic disciplines, writing skills, fieldwork and practice, and entrepreneurship and employment. In 2012 the following themes will be heroes, politics of sciences, writing a research proposal, ethics and choices, and logics and argumentation.

The student-led honors classes that are part of the honors seminars are organized five or six times a year by a small group of students. Student-led classes, which are not graded, are included in the program because they involve students in the program, provide practice in organizational skills, and develop their ability to combine their fields of interest with the program. The students are responsible for choosing the topics for these classes, which have ranged from urban development in earthquake-prone areas to electric cars, from fair trade to the geopolitics of the North Pole, from an entrepreneurial game to different academic views on recent developments in Libya.

All three freedoms are involved in these student-led classes. Because students are free to select the topic, they can connect the class to their own fields of interest; because they are free to choose the classroom activities, they can opt for experiences that fit their learning strategies; and because they are responsible for organizing these classes, they learn to take ownership.

The program has a long tradition of these student-led classes, which are highly valued by the students as demonstrated by evaluations as recent as 2008–2009 and as far back as 1998–1999 (Wolfensberger, 2009). More recently, the 2011–2012 evaluations show that 77% of the respondents (highly) value the freedom to organize part of their own education and 78% feel that organizing parts of their own education is an important skill (Schippers). The student-led classes can also be considered a success because, although student-led classes might be organized at the last minute, no students have failed to deliver the class.

Over the years, most of these student-led classes have taken the shape of lectures by one or two guest lecturers either from within and from outside of the faculty. Most of these guest lecturers are enthusiastic and honoured to be invited; they give interesting presentations and leave room for questions and debate. A few student-led classes have taken a very different shape, such as role-playing, debate, fieldtrips, or simulation games. Students acquire organizing skills as they arrange one or several guest lecturers or plan the structure of the meeting. Not all persons they invite as speakers immediately reply or agree, so they have to develop alternatives as well.

At the same time, the student-led classes do not always meet all their aims or live up to the teachers' expectations. Although students value the opportunity to shape part of their education themselves, the learning effect from organizing the student-led classes seems a bit meagre. In the 2011–2012 evaluation, about half of the fifteen respondents to this question felt that they had learned (a lot) from these classes whereas two said they had learned nothing at all (Schippers). This result from the evaluation roughly coincides with teachers' perceptions. Most of the student-led classes have a "traditional" character, resembling ordinary lectures: students sit and listen while a (guest)

teacher speaks. Organizing such a seminar might require little more than inviting speakers, so students may feel they have not learned much from organizing a class because they have given little attention to the possibilities of the topic itself, to possible classroom activities, or to the aims of the meeting. Also, if students are active members of student organizations, as quite a number of them are, they have invited speakers before and will not really be challenged by doing that.

All the targeted freedoms are combined in these student-led classes but do not automatically lead to creativity. We might expect honors students, as critical “consumers” of education, to have clear opinions on education and on what works best for them, so we might expect them to step “out of the box” when they are free to organize their own education. Honors teachers are frequently surprised, therefore, that students choose to organize lectures. Is this the kind of education gifted students prefer? Do they simply enjoy sitting back and listening for two hours when the topic is not part of their core curriculum? How much creative thinking is involved in the organization of such a seminar? Are students using the freedom they are granted to the fullest? And what examples have teachers been setting?

To start off with the last question: if teachers are somewhat disappointed in the students’ creativity, then we need to look in the mirror and wonder how creative we are in designing honors seminars or education in general. We hope to be inspired by students, but what they offer might be a reflection of what they “learn” by taking classes and courses at the Faculty. Perhaps, we have to step out of the box ourselves more often and find different classroom activities that fit our aims.

Setting the example ourselves might induce more creativity in students. On the other hand, if we feel that students do not use the freedom offered to the fullest and take the easy road when organizing a seminar, then we have to check whether the aims and requirements are clear. Demanding creativity is far-fetched, but students should learn to think beyond content into aims (what do you want to achieve with the seminar? what do you want your audience to learn?) and into what classroom activities are suited to reach these aims. Experiences over the years have shown that creativity cannot be achieved simply through a list of conditions and requirements, which seem to conflict with freedom, responsibility, and ownership, but we need some such lists to have students move beyond thinking about content.

To the teachers, these student-led classes thus pose a challenge. Students clearly do not fail at organizing a class, but not all classes live up to the expectations. Freedom means handing over responsibility and thus having confidence in the students, not meddling with their strategies or trying to re-take charge when students do last-minute work. At the same time, freedom



does not mean total laissez-faire. Students ought to have secure back-up and advice, to know the teacher is involved and cares about the seminar, but over the years few students have come to their teachers for advice, instead perceiving the student-led classes as do-it-yourself events. Some students who did come by with (practical) questions proved to have all sorts of original and creative ideas but perhaps not the experience and confidence to try these ideas out. Teachers need to invite students for consultation and brainstorming, to show they are willing to share their teaching experience with the students, without meddling in their plans. Students can thus take the lead while counting on a teacher to guide and advise them.

## CONCLUSION

Many honors programs offer degrees of freedom or autonomy for their students as a necessary condition for the fullest development of the students' talents. Such freedom might come in many guises. The honors program of the Faculty of Geosciences fosters three kinds of freedom: passion, learning strategies and behavior, and involvement. These freedoms are valued by students and have proven effective over the years but are not easy. Our student-led classes are a successful component of the honors program but do not seem to reach their full potential. The targeted freedoms offered in this case often translate into do-it-yourself education and result in traditional lectures. Students seem to focus on content and not on organizing a class in creative ways.

Freedom, it turns out, can only lead to extraordinary achievements when it comes with conditions and requirements. Such requirements have to be clear but also relevant to the students. Freedom thus needs to be scaffolded, especially in honors programs because critical consumers of education do not necessarily know how to organize education. Co-ownership is not the same as co-producership, which asks for a very different role for teachers, who have to step back but still be fully involved; this role takes teachers beyond the classroom and makes them advisors and counsellors as well as teachers. Student-led classes are therefore not more time-efficient for teachers and should not be misinterpreted as a quick fix toward greater teacher efficiency, a topical debate given the shrinking state funding for Dutch universities. We hope we have shown that that freedom should encourage creativity, not simple efficiency, and that, for both students and teachers, it is never cheap or easy but is consistently rewarding.

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## APPENDIX A

### HONORS EDUCATION AT THE FACULTY OF GEOSCIENCES, UTRECHT UNIVERSITY—A SHORT HISTORY

The Department of Human Geography and Planning first experimented with honors education in 1995 (Harms, L. & Hogenstijn, 2001). From 1997 onwards the department offered a fully fledged honors program (Wolfensberger, 2008). This was one of the early honors initiatives in the Netherlands. From 2003 onwards the Dutch educational field and the State Ministry of Education became more and more aware of the necessity to accommodate talented students with additional challenges and opportunities. In 2003 the government discussed a report titled “Het opschudden van de gelijkheidsdeken,” a telling title that was translated into Lifting the blanket of equality by Van der Vaart and Wolfensberger (2004). This report presented a clear breach with a “tradition” of equality thinking in Dutch education in which “extra staff time and effort tends to be spent on weaker students (more tutorial help, making and grading of exam retakes, etc.)” (Van der Vaart and Wolfensberger, 2004: 3). With two national programs Ruim Baan voor Talent (2004–2007) and Sirius (2008–2012) experiments in and developments of honors programs were supported.

Since 2008 talented students of all the undergraduate programs of the faculty of Geosciences have the opportunity to participate in the faculty-wide honors college. The Honors College Geosciences aims to accommodate the 5 to 10% best performing students, but currently accommodates approximately 50 students (5.5%). Because of their longer tradition in honors education and the larger number of students in the department of Human Geography and Planning this groups of students has in the past years outnumbered participants from the other departments. However, the group is becoming more mixed every year.

Although honors education is anchored in Dutch education by now, the current times are exciting times. The State Ministry of Education and Utrecht University have agreed to increase membership of honors colleges from 5% in 2006, to 9% in 2010 and even 12% in 2016 (Bok, Koster and Van der Vaart 2012). Moreover, the University of Utrecht “updates” its educational model for bachelor’s level education, and this has consequences for the organization and structure of the honors programs.

## **APPENDIX B**

### **STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF FREEDOM**

The 2011–2012 evaluation of the Honors College Geosciences demonstrate that students recognize and value the targeted freedom. Out of the 58 original participants 27 completed the detailed evaluation form. Of these respondents 96% feels that the honors program grants students more responsibility than the regular program. Students recognize this responsibility for example in making their own planning and setting their own deadlines in certain projects. Making their own planning is seen as important by 96% of the respondents. In their explanations some students indicate that making your own planning makes you more responsible and offers important lessons to be learnt.

All respondents claim that they find it important that they can follow their own passions and 70% of them feels that the honors program offers more freedom to follow their own interests en passions than the regular program. They recognize this freedom in projects where they can choose their own topic.

Source: Analyse jaarevaluatie Honours College Geowetenschappen [Analysis, Annual Evaluation of Geoscience Honors College] 2011–2012